

Being the Beloved
Rev. Matt Landry
August 6, 2017

It was a beautiful, yet somber Saturday here in Indianapolis. I'm sure you noticed the moving tribute for Lt. Aaron Allen yesterday, from the Memorial Service downtown to the long procession of nearly 500 vehicles. The city remembered an officer who gave his life in service. Many people also gathered yesterday afternoon at Plainfield United Methodist Church to remember and celebrate the life of Pastor Bob Walters who was a missionary in the Congo and former Associate here at Meridian Street from 1999 to 2001. He, too, gave his entire life to serve the church around the world. I ask again for your prayers for the families grieving the losses of Lt. Allen and Pastor Walters. A clergy colleague remarked yesterday, "During my short stay on earth, may I respect life, all of it, even my own."

For nearly four years I entered the county jail on Thursday morning for a time of prayer and Bible study with the inmates. Some weeks we had 6 to 8, other weeks we had 1. There were some weeks when I questioned why I was doing this and if it was bearing any fruit and there were other times when it was clear that the Spirit was present. There were many times when we laughed, others that we cried, and many times where confession happened, often honest confession of brokenness and powerlessness. One man in particular asked me point blank after a very honest confession, "How can God love me?" I tried my best to share with him the gospel, the good news that he is a beloved child of God. His response, "Yeah right, I'm a beloved child of God." It was my prayer and hope that this man would not forget his belovedness, as Father Henri Nouwen put it, but it is still something we all struggle with from time to time. We, too, ask, "How can God love me?"

It's easy to forget that we are God's children, created in the image of God, precious and loved by God, even though it's the gospel message. Danielle Shroyer in her book *Original Blessing* wrote, "The gospel is not a story of us being separated by sin from God. It's the story of a God who is so faithfully for us and intent on being with us that God became human to help us embody the wholeness and fullness of life we've been made for. It's not a story of separation. It's a story of invitation and participation." I wish that man would have known this good news, because too often what others experience in our world is not good news, but judgment and exclusion.

If only we would remember that we are all the beloved. This is a theme that comes up often in the writings of Henri Nouwen. In his book *Life of the Beloved*, Nouwen wrote, "I kept running around it in large or small circles, always looking for someone or something able to convince me of my Belovedness. To be chosen as the Beloved of God is something radically different. Instead of excluding others, it includes others. Instead of rejecting others as less valuable, it accepts others in their own uniqueness."

Beauty is found in the diversity of God's creation and in our uniqueness. We're all created to be different people. As I shared at the beginning of our summer sermon series a few weeks ago, we're not called to be Dr. King or Mother Teresa, we can certainly learn from their wisdom and experience and follow the Spirit of Jesus that lead them to do what they did, but we're

ultimately called to be ourselves. That's also the gift of what we find in the assessment known as the Enneagram.

I have greatly enjoyed talking with many of you on Tuesday mornings over the last few months as I have shifted my office hours to the Illinois Street Food Emporium down the street. Come visit me sometime on a Tuesday morning from 8 to 9:30am. I have had many visitors from the congregation come to just share in life and pastries. Nothing better than that! (And I must confess that I have appreciated all the scones and muffins shared with me during our sharing.) One Tuesday, a person in our congregation came to my table, threw down the book by Ian Cron that we have used for our summer series titled *The Road Back To You* and said, "I think you have disturbed my peace. This book has made me think about who I am." And that's the point. No matter your age, where you are in your journey of faith, or even how much you know about the Bible or faith, God calls us to know ourselves and when we know ourselves we know that we are God's beloved who have been blessed with unique gifts and interests and personalities. We chose this series and to use the Enneagram this summer to help us know ourselves better, our personalities and interests and begin to discern how we can use them for God's glory. If you're a challenger, then prophetically push God's people to see differently. If you're a helper, help. If you're an investigator, use your wisdom for the good of the Body of Christ. As you discover more about who you are, you discover more about the God who created you.

Have you looked in the mirror lately and thought, "Wow, I am God's beloved"? Alright, well, I haven't either, but that doesn't make it any less true. Think about this for a second. In the beautiful and poetic story of creation in Genesis, God spoke and created human beings in the image of God, Godlike, reflecting God's nature. God blessed us. God called God's creation good. Nouwen again wrote, "Self-rejection is the greatest enemy of the spiritual life because it contradicts the sacred voice that calls us the "Beloved". Being the Beloved expresses the core truth of our existence."

Our original and true nature is one of grace. We were created in the image of God, in the likeness of the fullness of grace, love, and joy, because those are characteristics of God. As the Franciscan theologian and author, Richard Rohr, wrote, "If we are made in the image of God, then our original state is grace, not sin." Don't you love the intimate imagery of Psalm 139? There's no place we can go away from God's presence, yet another reminder of God's goodness to us. Toward the end of the reading from this Psalm, we begin to read these personal, close words, "For you created my inmost being, you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made." We were created for the glory of God. We were created to be beloved, out of the goodness of God.

And we were all created different. Some are perfectionists, challengers, peacemakers, helpers, performers, romantics, investigators, loyalists, and enthusiasts; all the types of the Enneagram. Some live in the gut triad, the heart or the mind, none of them are bad, but we need to know where we're coming from and how we see things differently. As Rev. Ian Cron writes in the final chapter of his book, "The Enneagram shows us that we can't change the way other people see, but we can try to experience the world through their eyes and help them change what they do with what they see. It is a tool that awakens our compassion for people just as they are, not the people we wish they would become so our lives would become easier."

This reminds me of a quote that is actually used in this final chapter, but it's one I have read before by the Trappist monk Thomas Merton, "The beginning of love is to let those we love be perfectly themselves, and not to twist them to fit our own image. Otherwise we love only the reflection of ourselves we find in them." It's actually at the top of your bulletin this morning. To let those we love be perfectly themselves and to let ourselves be perfectly who God has created us to be, that's difficult. That's really hard to do, I realize that, but that's a part of our God given goodness.

I have continued to see how each of you are unique in your image and likeness of God. As I mentioned before about my coffee house office hours, they are different every time someone sits down to talk with me, because we're all different. I'm thankful for all that you bring to my coffee chats and to this community of faith. Otherwise, it would just be boring, right? Church would be boring if we were all exactly the same, but that's not the Kingdom of God in all of its richness and diversity. Now I realize that we are all made in God's image, yet it is also our lifelong work to express God's likeness in unique forms and ways. This begins with remembering with compassion ourselves and others and how together we are God's beautiful creation.

It is my hope that as we wrap up this sermon series where we have used the personality types of the Enneagram to look into the lives of a few heroes of faith, that we begin to have compassion on ourselves and on others. I hope we'll begin to realize or remember that we're created in the image of God and so is every person we encounter. This week we hosted 4 wonderful families with Interfaith Hospitality Network here at Meridian Street. While they had the practical needs of food and housing, above all else, I hope they know they are the beloved. I witnessed so many volunteers this week bring food, offer shelter, and more importantly, they brought love.

Danyelle Shroyer recalls her first job after seminary in her book *Original Blessing*, when she was a chaplain in a retirement community where she worked mostly with the residents in the Alzheimer's unit. Every week she would walk up and down the halls offering prayer and conversation with anyone interested. She soon learned some of the residents' favorite Psalms and many of them would ask her to read the Psalms to them over and over again, many times the same one they just heard. They would close their eyes as if to let the words wash over them as they heard the words of the 23rd Psalm and others. But no words of Scripture brought the same response as Isaiah 43:1.

She would often feel overwhelmed at the enormity of being charged to say something holy or profound at life's most critical moments. I get that, I've been there too. And a friend told her to highlight Isaiah 43:1 as if to say, "This. Just read this. (And maybe otherwise just keep your mouth shut.)" Also something I have learned too. In those moments when words wouldn't come or when she was unsure of how the resident was, she would simply read, "But now thus says the Lord, God who created you, God who formed you: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name."

May you know today and always that the God who created you, the God who formed you, the God who loves you, has called you by name and continues to speak to everyone, "You belong to me. You are mine. You are my beloved."

As I close this morning, I would like to offer a blessing prayer written by John O'Donohue. Let us pray:

May you recognize in your life the presence, power, and light of your soul. May you realize that you are never alone, that your soul in its brightness and belonging connects you intimately with the rhythm of the universe. May you have respect for your individuality and difference. May you realize that the shape of your soul is unique, that you have a special destiny here, that behind the facade of your life there is something beautiful and eternal happening. May you learn to see yourself with the same delight, pride, and expectation with which God sees you in every moment. Let it be so. Amen.

Scripture:

Psalm 139 and Genesis 1: 26-28